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The Misrepresentation of Women in Video Games

ACCORDING TO THE MOST RECENT STATISTICS, 45% OF THE people who regularly play video games in the United States are now female (Entertainment Software Association, 2021). The video game industry is no longer dominated by male consumers, and yet many times the female roles in video games still do not demonstrate the well-rounded, complex characters that female consumers may want. Instead, women in video games generally seem to display “emphasized femininity” by fulfilling female stereotypes in an unrealistic way (Dill & Thill, 2007). This emphasized femininity can be displayed by being oversexualized (Melzer, 2019; Summers & Miller, 2014), or by displaying femininity to an exaggerated degree (Bègue et al., 2017; Jenson & De Castell, 2021; Summers & Miller, 2014).

These two types of inaccurate female characters, and other representations, often demonstrate the two separate but interrelated parts of the ambivalent sexism theory, as introduced by Glick and Fiske (2001). The ambivalent sexism framework consists of two types of sexism: hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism is having negative attitudes and beliefs against women and their roles, or believing that women are overly emotional, incompetent, or try to control men through manipulation or sexually. Benevolent sexism is perceived to be positive and well-intentioned but ends up portraying women as needing support and protection and is often patronizing (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

There is some progress in having women play more agentic and dynamic roles. However, there are many times when women are depicted in “safe” and acceptable roles in a cultural context; for example, many women in video games are consistently reliant on male figures (Perreault et al., 2018). Some genres in particular are making strides towards less sexist depictions of women. For example, female characters in indie games tend to be much more complex well-rounded characters than those depicted in mainstream video games, which tend to have more stereotypical archetypes of females (Perreault et al.,

2021). Although some progress has been made in recent years regarding female characters in video games, it is still important to support a change in the video game industry that upholds less sexism against women because it can impact the consumers of video games and dissuade women from playing video games.

Sexism in Video Games Affects the Players

Evidence that sexism in the media, especially video games, affects the consumers varies. However, it is likely that since media in general has been shown to affect beliefs, that video games themselves may also affect attitudes and beliefs.

Other Forms of Media that Affect Consumers

There have been many findings that media affects the attitudes and beliefs of its consumers. One classic example is Becker's (2004) study of body image in Fiji. After 3 years of having western media and television people in Fiji started to change their body image beliefs to match western ideals more closely (mainly that being skinny as a female is better) which ended up affecting eating disorder rates in Fiji (Becker, 2004). Another more recent example showed that women who reported having read at least part of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series reported higher levels of sexism on the ambivalent sexism scale on average (Altenburger et al., 2017). Those who considered the book to be romantic had a significantly higher ambivalent sexism score (in both hostile and benevolent sexism) (Altenburger et al., 2017). These both indicate that the media that is consumed, and what the consumers think about it, affects their attitudes and beliefs.

Studies of Whether Video Games Affect Players

There has been no definitive causal evidence from studies that indicate that video games themselves change a person's attitudes or beliefs. However, there have been many studies relating to correlation between video games and the players' beliefs. For example, a study by Stermer and Burley (2015) showed that playing video games that are perceived as sexist is associated with higher rates of benevolent sexism. Another study found that those who were frequently exposed to negative gender stereotypes and violence from video games were more likely to condone those same negative gender stereotypes, as well as violence (Brenick et al., 2007). Although neither of these studies indi-

cate causation, the correlation between playing video games and sexism could indicate that there is some connection.

A few studies have been performed to try and connect video games and sexist beliefs, but these studies could be improved upon to possibly get different results. Using a gender roles in society questionnaire, one three-year longitudinal study found no statistically significant differences between those who played video games and those who did not (Breuer et al., 2015). This study, however, was conducted on 14 to 17-year-old teenagers who had already begun to play video games before the study began. It may be more effective to introduce those who have not played video games before to video games for the study, because it is possible that the views of the people playing video games have already changed. This study also did not monitor what types of video games were being played, which raises the question if those in the study were playing video games that upheld sexist attitudes and beliefs or if they were not (Breuer et al., 2015). Another study found no statistically significant data connecting sexist beliefs in video games (in this case the overused “damsel in distress trope”) and the effect on the player (Hansen, 2018). 120 participants were randomly split into four groups (which had four different options about what gender the male/female hero and victim was). Afterwards, they were asked various questions about the dependency of women and gender roles on a Likert scale, and no statistical significance between groups was found (Hansen, 2018). However, these participants only played the video game in between eight and thirty minutes, which is unlikely to be sufficient time to change a person’s attitudes or beliefs, especially since these participants on average already played seven hours of video games a week (Hansen, 2018). The questionnaire itself was also obviously ascertaining the degree of the participant’s sexism, which could cause the participant to answer questions dishonestly. Both of these studies have merit, however, and it would be useful to try aspects of these studies again in order to see if the findings would be consistent.

There has been at least one study that indicated a connection that could apply to video games. This study found that after men (who were the only participants of this study) were primed with the communal stereotype of women they scored higher on a benevolent sexism scale (Good & Sanchez, 2009). Although video game stereotypes may not always endorse female communion, they many times endorse the idea that women are “not agentic.” Women in video games tend to be passive rather than active; they are rarely able to choose for themselves and do not make their ideas well known (Bègue et al., 2017).

Instead, they are often depicted as in need of saving, or act as rewards for the protagonist.

Although it is important to note how the harmful stereotypes that exist in video games may be affecting the players, it is also important to note that video game consumers may be affected by not having positive characterizations in video games. As Mitchell (2020, p. 63) said, “The critical potential of these narratives is squandered through the inadvertent reification of these stereotypical characteristics.” We do not yet understand the possible harm that may be done to video game players, but we also do not yet understand the potential for good that could come about if women and other characters were depicted in healthy, well-rounded ways.

Sexism Against Women Dissuades Female Players

Although many women play video games now, there are still less women than men who play video games (Entertainment Software Association, 2021). This may be because of the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women in video games. Melzer (2019) suggested that women may play less video games than men because of the stereotypical roles that women play in video games, and because women tend to be oversexualized. These kinds of misrepresentations, and other factors, can create a toxic environment for women playing video games (Jenson & De Castell, 2021).

Undertones of benevolent sexism may also affect a woman’s desire to play video games. It has been shown that women experience cardiovascular symptoms similar to experiencing a threat while performing a task after being complimented in a benevolently sexist way immediately after being complimented, in contrast with those who receive a normal compliment (Lamarch et al., 2020). Being called a “smart girl” (even though the participants were fully grown women) or being praised for being able to keep their emotions in check affected their performance on a task made them feel like they were under threat (Lamarch et al., 2020). It is possible that seeing women in media being treated in a similar way makes some female gamers feel uncomfortable, or perform worse in a video game, which would both contribute to them being less likely to continue gaming.

Conclusion

In the past video games have been perceived as a predominately male space (Fox & Teng, 2014), however, that is becoming less and less of a truth. That

makes it more important to have better represented females and more female protagonists. Some may worry that the introduction of more well-rounded female characters and more female protagonists may dissuade male gamers from playing video games. In fact, most game developers tend to avoid taking risks, and therefore may stick to depicting character archetypes that are like ones in the past to avoid losing customers (Johnson, 2013). However, male players do not seem to view more agentic characteristics in female characters negatively (Melzer & Engelberg, 2016). In addition to this, around 75% of the males surveyed by Wiseman (2015) said they were equally likely to play a video game that centered around a male protagonist as a female protagonist. If most gamers are not opposed to supporting a change of female representation in video games, then the video game community can avoid the potential negative effects from sexism in video games and can allow more women to be comfortable playing video games.

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